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AUTHOR Wragg, E. C.; Haynes, G. S.; Wragg, C. M.; Chamberlin, R. P.
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the problems associated with identifying incompetent teachers and it examines the lack of effort in defining incompetence and the corresponding absence of imagination in prescribing desirable traits in instruction. Described is the Teaching Competence Project, a 2-year research project undertaken in England that studied the basic question of what constitutes incompetence in the eyes of those making the judgment. It focuses on research related to head teachers (principals) and reports on an investigation of their perceptions and experiences of the problem of incompetence. It explores incompetence, operational definitions of incompetence, how teachers react to allegations of incompetence, what support was available to underperforming teachers, who else became involved, the duration of the cases, and the procedures followed. The article looks at the role of teacher-union officers and considers the types of cases encountered by union officers. It details the procedural issues and the role of the teacher unions. The article also focuses on local-education-authority officers, actions taken by the chairs of school-governing bodies, the reactions of teachers who have been alleged to be incompetent, and parents' and students' reactions to, and the steps they took when confronted with, incompetence. (RJM)

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Managing Incompetent Teachers

Professor E C Wragg
G S Haynes, MPhil
Dr C M Wragg
Dr R P Chamberlin

School of Education, University of Exeter
Heavitree Road
Exeter EX1 2LU
England

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at the
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Managing Incompetent Teachers

Until now there has been no British research of any standing that has investigated the issues surrounding teachers said to be incompetent, and few studies of this area in other countries. Little is known, therefore about how such teachers are identified, what criteria are used, and what happens to them. One of the few comprehensive studies of how principals of schools manage poorly performing teachers is that of Bridges, first written in 1986 and updated in 1992 to include more data about managerial responses to incompetent teachers. Bridges describes how United States administrators and principals deal with the problem of teacher incompetence. In practice it is largely an account of how they fail to deal with it, and he places most of the blame for lack of action on other participant groups or external factors.

The first problem he cites is that of teachers' job security, with tenured teachers being presumed to be competent and the burden of proof resting on the School District attempting to dismiss them. This problem is compounded in the US by the need to prove incompetence in court and by the cost of legal representation, which Bridges' administrators estimated (prior to 1986) at $50,000 per case, sometimes more. Another related problem Bridges identifies is that "incompetence is a concept with no precise meaning; moreover, there are no clear-cut standards or cut-off points which enable an administrator to say with certitude that a teacher is incompetent" (1992, p.24). He notes that only the states of Alaska and Tennessee have attempted to define the term, but even these do not supply any criteria for what incompetence in the classroom actually is. This lack of clear criteria of incompetence makes it harder to prove a case in court, and Bridges also found it results in standards of what counts as incompetence varying from District to District as well as from State to State.

Bridges (1992) reported that lesson observation, allied with supervisory ratings, was the most frequently mentioned method of detecting poor performance reported by most School Districts in California. Teachers were evaluated on a 1 – 5 scale, (1 - outstanding, 2 – good, 3 – satisfactory, 4 – needs to improve, 5 – unsatisfactory) but the rigour of this evaluation is questionable. In Baltimore, Philadelphia, in 1983, 44.6% of teachers were rated 'outstanding' while 0.003% received a rating of less than satisfactory (Digilio 1984). Similar figures are found in other states, and Bridges (1992) cites examples of many teachers, diagnosed as extremely poor performers, who had received satisfactory or even glowing evaluations for many years. The habit of giving high ratings is not a recent phenomenon. Davis (1964) cites examples from 1907 when 90% of teachers in Brooklyn were given marks of over 90%, while in Chicago 96% of teachers were graded high enough to entitle them to promotion.

Bridges also cites the desire of principals to avoid conflict. He found that although supervisory ratings were the most frequently mentioned ways of detecting poor performance, in fact principals withhold negative information from the teachers, gloss over problems, and give good evaluations to encourage the teachers. The methods head teachers use to evaluate teachers have been criticised both for their lack of rigour and for the content of what is evaluated. Darling-Hammond (1986) states:

> "The most important aspects of teaching are ignored in favor of measuring the measurable, no matter how trivial." (p.535)

She criticises the 'ticklist evaluation' in which head teachers evaluate teachers by ticking off specific items of allegedly desirable behaviour such as 'starting classes on time' and 'keeping a

brisk pace of instruction'. Darling-Hammond says there is nothing to show which, if either, is more important, or to consider whether there are occasions when it would be more appropriate to introduce concepts slowly. It ignores human relation skills or the ability to relate to children and, she believes, treats teaching as an unvarying didactic exercise that is unresponsive to the individual characteristics of students or the nature of learning tasks:

> "Observations of this type reveal little about the coherence of the curriculum, the depth and breadth of content covered, the range of teaching techniques used, the quality and variety of materials employed, the types and frequency of student assignments, the quality of instruments (tests, papers, projects) used for student assessment, the kinds of feedback students receive on their work, or the appropriateness of any of these things for the classroom context. These are all important elements of teaching ... that are not attended to in a traditional evaluation process." (p.534)

Haertel (1991) backs up these criticisms, claiming that proper professional assessment of teachers would not look for approved answers to multiple choice questions, but that:

> "State of the art classroom observations acknowledge that the same behavior may be appropriate in one situation and inappropriate in another, and depend on the professional judgement of an assessor who may accept different specific evidence for the same indicator, depending on the situation." (p.22)

The principals in Bridges' research appeared to do the opposite of what was advised by Potter & Smellie (1995) who stress the importance of head teachers acting quickly, because:

> "Poor performance which has been tolerated for so long ... becomes infinitely more difficult to tackle." (p.74)

They also emphasise that it is the head teacher's responsibility to make clear to all staff the expectations they should fulfil, and to monitor them to ensure that they are. They say:

> "A member of staff cannot fairly be accused of underperforming if he or she has never been made aware of the standards of performance which are expected of him or her. The setting of those standards is something which should be done in the initial contract of employment, in the job description, in day-to-day supervisions and in appraisals." (p.73)

In the USA, because teachers are recruited and employed by the District, District administrators have an option not available to their counterparts in Britain. They are able to transfer teachers to other schools, place them as permanent supply teachers (the "substitute pool"), make them tutors to individual children who are unable to attend school or find them other non-teacher positions, perhaps in school libraries, the museum, or even, as Bridges (1992) found, driving the school bus. US principals are able to recommend teachers for transfer, and this results, in some Districts, in poorly performing teachers being transferred from school to school in what has been called "the turkey trot" or "the dance of the lemons". (Bridges 1992, p.36).

The Teaching Competence Project

The Teaching Competence Project, a two year research project undertaken in England based at the University of Exeter, with funding from the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, has studied central concerns, such as: What constitutes 'incompetence' in the eyes of those making the judgement? When teachers are regarded as incompetent, what steps, if any, are taken to address the issue? What are the views and reactions of those identified as incompetent? What are the outcomes of action or inaction? Which seem to be successful and which unsuccessful solutions?

The Project comprised a number of interlinked studies which were designed to elicit the views of the different parties involved in cases of alleged incompetence. The tools of data collection were semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. Many of the questions in the questionnaires involved responding to a set of predetermined categories, but in order to obtain as full a picture as possible, some questions invited freehand responses. The predetermined categories had been constructed using a grounded theory approach following preliminary analysis of interview data, where appropriate. Analysis and statistical calculations were carried out using SPSS 7 for Windows for the quantitative data, and a consensus 'rate until agreement' principle for the qualitative data. This involved discussion between members of the research team on what meaning was being inferred from the written freehand statements, until a particular interpretation was agreed. This paper discusses the findings from surveys of the following groups in schools and local education authorities (LEAs) in England:

1. **Head teachers (principals)**
   (a) Interviews with 60 primary and secondary head teachers.
   (b) Analysis of 684 case studies of individual teachers alleged to be incompetent, reported on in detail by their head teacher.

2. **Teacher unions**
   Interviews with 21 representatives of the teacher and head teacher unions.

3. **Local Education Authorities (LEAs)**
   (a) Interviews with 20 LEA personnel and advisory officers.
   (b) Document survey of capability/competence procedures.

4. **Chairs of School Governing Bodies**
   Questionnaire survey of 74 chairs of school governing bodies.

5. **Teachers alleged to be incompetent**
   Questionnaire survey of 70 allegedly 'incompetent' teachers (self-reports).

6. **Parents**
   Interviews with 100 parents.

7. **Pupils**
   Questionnaire and interview survey of 519 pupils, aged from 7 – 16 years old.

In order to enable comparisons to be made between the perceptions and experiences of the different groups interviewed, where possible, core questions were asked of each group, whether by interview or questionnaire. These related to:

- definitions of incompetence
- how competence was monitored in schools
- detailed descriptions of cases of teachers alleged to be incompetent:
  - phase in which teacher taught
  - age and teaching experience
  - aspects of teaching regarded as unsatisfactory
  - how the teacher's problem had been identified
  - the response and behaviour of the teacher
  - the action, if any, taken by the school
  - the capability/competence procedures used, if any
  - who else was involved in the case
  - what the outcome was
  - a retrospective analysis of how the process could have been improved
  - the length of time the head teacher had been in post

Head teachers, teacher union officers, LEA staff, chairs of governing bodies and teachers who had worked alongside incompetent colleagues were also asked to describe and discuss their roles. Parent interview schedules and pupil questionnaires were much shorter and focused on the respondents' constructs of 'good' and 'bad' teachers, with additional questions designed to elicit the type of issues which would motivate a parent or pupil to complain to a school about a teacher.

1. The views and experiences of head teachers (60 interviews and 684 case studies)

This section of the paper deals with those aspects of the research related to head teachers (principals) and comprises an investigation of their perceptions and experiences of the problem of incompetent teachers, and an analysis of their role. An initial set of 60 interviews revealed a considerable amount of stress on all sides. One head teacher had "gone to hell and back". Many spoke of the torment of having to reconcile their duty towards the pupils in their school with their role as a senior manager of a failing colleague, though all said that the welfare of pupils came first.

As there are many more primary schools than secondary schools in the UK, and based on our previous experience of national survey returns, questionnaires were sent out to a 1:8 random sample of all primary heads and a 1:5 random sample of all secondary heads in England. This produced a total sample of 3,017. Responses were obtained from 1,966 heads, an extremely high return rate for such a long and detailed questionnaire, especially given the severe pressures under which head teachers work. Of these, some 654 heads described in detail at least one case of alleged incompetence in which they themselves had been directly involved during the last ten years. Thirty of the heads described two cases, so this paper reports the findings from the analysis of 684 case studies.

In terms of their experience of headship, the 654 respondents were split roughly into three thirds: 30% had five years' experience or less as a head teacher, 32% had been heads for between five and ten years, and 38% had over ten years' experience. The sample was almost exactly a fifty-fifty split of female and male heads. Two thirds had been in their first headship when the case on which they were reporting occurred.

Findings

Written definitions of incompetence

When asked to define incompetence in the teaching profession, most heads saw it as consisting of a cluster of factors, not just one single one:

> "Poor classroom organisation. Poor class control. Low expectations. Inability to deliver the curriculum through lack of planning, poor subject knowledge and failure to capture the children's interest. Inability to communicate effectively with parents about children's performance."

> "Children are not engaged in meaningful learning experiences. Children are not progressing at an appropriate rate. Teacher is not able to plan appropriately for her class. Teacher is disorganised and generally is finding the demands made difficult to achieve."

There are some notable differences between the *written* and *operational* definitions of incompetence reported later, which are based on actual cases, rather than on speculation or stereotypes.

Identifying incompetence

First indications of a problem came from complaints from other teachers, parents, pupils themselves, and from the head teacher's informal monitoring. Both formal and informal monitoring by senior managers, such as deputy heads, were also informative, as were unsatisfactory test scores and examination results. Inspections by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) were mentioned relatively rarely in the identification of incompetence. A little below half the heads (45%) said that they had inherited a problem when they first arrived at a school, a feature which occurs a number of times in this research. New heads seem particularly conscious, on starting in a new school, of those who seem less than competent. Equally, some teachers who were alleged to be incompetent complained that they had been valued by the previous head, but experienced a clash of values, beliefs, practices or personality, when the new head came.

Head teachers said that they themselves took the responsibility of raising the issue with the teacher concerned. Two thirds of heads (66%) said that they were the first person to tell the teacher officially that there was thought to be a problem. The next most likely person to raise the matter first with the teacher was a head of department or curriculum co-ordinator (15%), while in third place was the deputy head (9%). Others who later became involved were most unlikely to be the bearer of the first message (LEA officer = 4%; school governor = 1%).

Formal or informal?

Individuals have their own definition of 'formality', but in most cases (59%) heads stated that the matter was first discussed informally. In over a quarter of cases (28%) it was first raised in a formal context. In only 2% of cases was it first discussed during a formal appraisal.

Operational definitions of incompetence

Table 1 shows the many factors thought to lie at the heart of the allegation of unsatisfactory performance. This is the nearest we can get to *operational* definitions of the concept 'incompetence', because this table is based on head teachers ticking a list of areas in which they thought a particular teacher's performance was unsatisfactory. In most cases several categories were ticked.

Table 1 Areas in which teacher's performance regarded as unsatisfactory (684 cases)

Factor	Percentage of cases
Expectation of pupils	65%
Pupils' progress	64%
Planning and preparation	58%
Classroom discipline	57%
Inability to respond to change	51%
Differentiating work according to pupils' abilities	50%
Monitoring and assessment of pupils	49%
Relationships with pupils	48%
Managing classroom resources	43%
Adhering to school policies	34%
Relationships with teacher colleagues	32%
Commitment to job	29%

There is a particularly strong focus on pupils' learning, and it is noticeable that the two highest categories are low expectations and poor progress.

How did the teacher react to the allegation of incompetence?

Being told that one is regarded as incompetent is not something that people find easy to accommodate, and head teachers reported a variety of reactions. In 44% of cases the head believed that the teacher concerned agreed with the assessment of the situation. But this overall figure conceals a crucial difference between two groups of teachers, those who were judged to have improved subsequently (about a quarter of the sample), and those who failed to improve what they did. Whereas teachers who subsequently, in the judgment of the head, improved their performance, and those who did not, showed similar features on many other measures, some 63% of the 'improvers' were stated by heads to have agreed there was a problem, compared with 38% of the 'non-improvers'. In the eyes of head teachers, recognising that all is not well can be an important part of successfully addressing a problem, while denial is seen as an obstacle.

What help or support was made available?

Most common strategies were in-house support and advice, target setting, observation of the teacher's lessons, sending the teacher on courses, giving the teacher the opportunity to observe good practice. In about a quarter of cases the teacher was given time out of the classroom to go on courses, witness good practice in the school or elsewhere, visit the doctor, or was offered some alleviation of duties, given a smaller or 'easier' class. Sometimes these strategies paid off, but this as not always the case, as the contrasting outcomes of the two cases below reveal.

> "Identification of key problem as perceived by head. List of concerns. Action list of strategies to help remedy the situation. Programme of informal/formal observations. Monitoring by Head of Department ... Visit by LEA adviser to comment on performance and offer advice. Visits to see good practice in school and other schools. INSET and course attendance." (Teacher improved)

> "Support from team leader and deputy head who helped with daily/weekly planning. Class observations with follow up meetings and written feedback by head. Smaller class than rest of the team. No challenging pupils included in the class. The best teaching area. Regular time off school to visit medics. Relief from taking any curriculum responsibility for two years." (Teacher did not improve)

While most heads appear to have made considerable efforts to offer support, a small number simply became exasperated or rejected the very idea of assistance.

> "Persuaded him to retire." (Did not improve)

> "No strategies. The incompetence related to failure to adhere to school policies/procedures over marking of GCSE (the public examination taken at age 16) homework, deadlines. I inherited the situation but I had on record other administrative and professional failings." (Did not improve)

Who else became involved?

Within the school the major responsibility for what happened was taken on by heads themselves. They were assisted in two thirds of cases, however, by their senior colleagues, such as the deputy head, and in about one third of cases by other members of the teaching staff. The most common external involvement was from LEA advisers or advisory teachers (58% of cases), union officials (48%) and officers from the LEA personnel department (48%).

The duration of the cases and the procedures followed

Many cases (46%) took from 1-3 years; one in five cases took longer; a majority of heads believed this to be too long and would have preferred six months to two terms:

> "There must be a faster method of removing teachers whose actions actually damage pupils' attitudes and therefore progress. Many teachers, when faced with situations recognise this and are grateful for support. What is not acknowledged is that the

present system becomes too prolonged, adversarial, demotivating for staff body as a whole."

The vast majority of head teachers (80%) followed a set of procedures that had been agreed by their LEA or by the governors within their school. One matter of concern, given the sensitivity of the situation, was that about one head teacher in six (17%) followed no predetermined procedures, but rather improvised actions as the case progressed, or said that existing procedures were regarded as inappropriate.

Outcomes

Of the 684 cases of under-performing teachers described in detail, 161 (24%) were believed to have improved later, 523 (76%) did not reach an acceptable level of competence. The two most common outcomes of cases where teachers did not improve were retirement and resignation (70%), though the early retirement option (20% of cases) is no longer so readily available in England since 1997. Of the teachers who subsequently reached an acceptable level of proficiency, 13% became 'good' or 'very good'; 42% became 'acceptable but with some problems remaining'.

Why did some teachers not improve?

Table 2 shows the content analysis of the freehand responses of a random sample of half the cases reported by the head teachers (327 cases) describing their beliefs about why non-improving teachers did not appear to be able to improve what they did.

Table 2 Most common reasons for teachers not being able to improve (327 teachers)

Reasons	Percentage of cases
Denial - would not accept there was a problem/did not act on advice	19%
Personality factors - should never have been a teacher	16%
Unable to change/adapt to national curriculum etc.	13%
Health problems/stress	10%
Not committed/lazy	9%
Personal problems, demoralisation, lack of confidence, burnout	8%
Context - in the wrong age range/position/school	4%

What approaches appeared to work well?

Given that only a quarter of the teachers described were judged to have improved their teaching and reached an acceptable standard, it would be easy to take a substantially negative view of these findings. However, we were particularly concerned to identify any particular approaches thought to have been successful, so head teachers had a freehand opportunity to describe these. As might be expected an analysis of our random sample of half the responses (327 heads) showed more offering examples of successful strategies from the improver than the non-improver group. Yet although 82% of heads describing an improver gave examples of approaches they thought had worked particularly well, so did 59% of heads describing

teachers not thought to have improved. The position was not thought to be totally beyond hope, even though many heads expressed doubts about many of the cases they reported.

The major categories involved support of one kind or another, but the rank order was different for the improver and non-improver groups. Table 3 shows what were regarded as the five most successful factors for each of the two groups. The prominent position of 'In-house support', as a strategy that was thought to work well with those who improved, confirms what union officers said about the importance of other people, particularly the head, wanting someone to succeed, rather than fail.

Table 3 Most successful approaches for improvers and non-improvers (327 heads)

	Strategy (Improvers)		Strategy (Non-improvers)	
1.	In-house support	43%	LEA support	29%
2.	Positive, sensitive approach	20%	In-house support	15%
3.	Openness/honesty	9%	Union/head relationship	12%
4.	Monitoring process	9%	LEA/school procedures	12%
5.	Observing good practice	7%	Keeping detailed records	10%

Since the actual wording of the question, however, was "Is there anything that you felt worked particularly well?", it has to be pointed out that, in the case of the non-improvers, 'worked well' was not always interpreted as 'helping the teacher'. Some 10% of heads said that 'getting rid of the teacher' had worked well.

Content analysis of freehand statements also shows that strategies that work in one context may not be effective in another. For example, offering a high level of support, observing someone's lessons, encouraging them to watch others, giving detailed and honest feedback, all these may lead to success with a teacher who actively seeks to improve, but fail if the teacher is acutely stressed, resistant, or simply appears not to have the inner resources to change existing practices.

What might heads have done differently?

The overwhelming response to this question was that action should have been taken earlier. Once ignored the problems simply escalated. There was no difference in this sentiment between heads describing teachers who had improved and those recording cases where the teacher had left the profession. With the benefit of hindsight many heads concluded that they had prolonged the informal stage for too long. They had often hoped the situation would improve, only to find that a more focused and structured approach was necessary, and this applied in the case of both those who improved and those who did not.

What were the constraints?

The most common constraint mentioned by the 62% of heads was the legal issue and their fear of running foul of the law. This was followed by the time-consuming nature of events, given their complexity. A further point was to do with *relationships*, between the head and parents, governors, the teacher alleged to be incompetent and other members of staff. They were also

concerned about the huge stresses on themselves, the teacher, other staff, pupils, parents and governors, often fearing for their own health and that of others.

Heads were asked whether they had received training in how to deal with cases of incompetence, only one third had. 89% of the rest indicated they would welcome training.

2. Teacher union officers

This section reports the findings from interviews with 21 representatives of the six major teacher and head teacher unions in England. The representatives interviewed ranged in experience in their post from one year to over twenty years. The majority were field officers who had come into this employment after being lay officials and teachers themselves, a small number were legal executives. Field officers described their role as broadly based, giving advice and support to members facing a variety of difficulties in their employment, as one put it: "professional casework of almost any kind, whether health, discipline, competence, professional relationships, grievances..."

Findings

Definitions and experiences of incompetence

There was a general consensus that the lack of a universally accepted definition of 'incompetence' may result in different interpretations of the term at different times and in different schools. A teacher who is valued in one school may be subjected to allegations of incompetence in another.

Teacher union officers believe that more attention needs to be given to the *causes* of incompetence. The changes in education in the United Kingdom over the decade 1988 to 1998 in particular, with the introduction of the national curriculum in 1989, the vastly increasing administrative responsibilities placed on teachers, and a sustained period of attacks on teachers from prominent politicians and national newspapers, were considered to have placed an unreasonable burden on the teaching profession:

> "... the pressure of 'red tape' paper work which inhibits the teacher in actually doing the job that they are paid to do."

> "The workload is just unrealistic. We experienced, in the 1980s, the high-flying yuppie who worked frantically and burnt themselves out in a few years. Teachers are expected to work at an intense level, but to maintain it for 40 years, and that clearly isn't possible."

Better awareness by school management of external factors such as marital difficulties or health problems was also called for. Some union officers believed that illness or problems in the home could induce a spiral of decline, with stress leading to relative failure in the classroom, producing in turn allegations of incompetence, leading eventually to more stress and increased ill health.

Many of the union officers interviewed felt very strongly that most teachers, if scruitinised closely, would be found to be under-performing in at least one area of their job at some point in time. One officer who had been a teacher himself said:

> "I've always thought that but for the grace of God almost any teacher can be judged to be incompetent in some respect by management. Once you start looking at individual teachers, then most will be found wanting in some respect."

It was a commonly held view that once a teacher had been identified as being 'incompetent', the standards which s/he then had to attain were beyond anything which would be normally required of any other teacher in the school.

Some officers also alleged that heads, when judging a teacher to be 'incompetent' often took too narrow a focus of that teacher's performance, perhaps highlighting one aspect of their classroom practice, without acknowledging the teacher's overall contribution to the school.

Types of cases encountered by union officers

The types of cases with which the interviewees had been involved covered the whole range of issues mentioned by head teachers in the first stage of this research: poor discipline, negative relationships with pupils, parents, and colleagues; insufficient planning and preparation; inadequate coverage of the national curriculum; inability to cope effectively with management responsibilities; poor exam results; failure to follow policy guidelines; paucity of classroom display. One officer estimated that 90% of the cases he dealt with were in connection with actual classroom practice, with only 10% related to teachers failing in their managerial capacity.

Teacher union officers indicated that two particular groups of teachers seemed more likely to be the subject of incompetence allegations: newly qualified teachers and those aged 45 and over with many years' teaching experience. Some felt that the motivation to adapt to change and to improve performance where problems were identified waned as teachers got older and, in the past, knew there was a route out. In the opinion of the interviewees, the newly qualified teachers facing capability procedures could be split into two groups: "those who should never have been in the job in the first place" and those "who have not been properly mentored or supported".

Teachers who had entered the profession later in their careers were also mentioned by a small number of interviewees as a disproportionately large section of their incompetence caseloads. Their explanation of why this was so suggests that the incompetence route may sometimes be used as a means of removing unwanted staff and raises the question of 'management bullying', an issue which has been described by some of the teachers taking part in our research.

While union officers reported that many cases are resolved successfully during the informal stage of a capability procedure as the teacher attains the required level of performance, once a case reaches the formal stage, the usual outcome is that the teacher leaves his/her post. In the past, the two most common routes have been through early retirement, or retirement on ill health grounds, routes which have been encouraged by teacher union officers.

Rising numbers of cases

There was evidence that the number of cases of alleged incompetence is increasing. Reasons for this were cited as the rate of curricular change due to the introduction of the national curriculum, and the high profile given to teaching standards by UK government and in the media. Common to many of the cases discussed by the teacher union officers was the impact of the arrival of a new head at a school, while Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspections were also seen as a major trigger. Concern was expressed that, with the closing down of the traditional early routes of exit for teachers, this will remove the opportunity for teachers to make what many of the interviewees referred to either implicitly or explicitly as an "exit with dignity". There was a general consensus that a person who had given many years of service to education should be allowed a means of salvaging pride and self esteem.

Importance of early union involvement

All unions officers believed that the earlier they became involved in a case the more chance there would be of a successful resolution for the teacher, but they reported a reluctance by some teachers to admit a problem existed, "probably because they are embarrassed about it, because it is saying to the world 'I'm not proficient' or because they haven't realised how vulnerable they are".

Factors important in cases where teachers improve

Where teachers had reached an acceptable level of competence, five common factors could be identified:

1. The teacher acknowledges there is a problem and realises the outcome could be serious
2. The teacher is receptive to advice and support
3. The head genuinely wants the teacher to improve
4. Quality support and advice is available, whether in-house or brought in
5. The process is dealt with sensitively

Where teachers failed to improve, it was not only that the above elements were not in place. Other factors were identified by the teacher union officers:

1. Some teachers are simply 'not up to the job'
2. External factors such as divorce or health problems may be too big an obstacle to overcome
3. Some teachers are unable to understand what is required of them
4. The capability procedure itself is too stressful for some, causing ill health

Procedural Issues

Local Education Authority (LEA) capability procedures have historically varied greatly in quality. Some LEAs have not produced separate *disciplinary* and *capability* procedures and this was viewed as problematic by the teacher union officers. Interviewees reported that, even where capability procedures have existed, head teachers dealing with cases of alleged incompetence have not always been aware of them or followed them.

There was a consensus that support for the teacher alleged to have a problem with their performance is not always as comprehensive as it should be. Financial constraints on schools, lack of will by the head teacher and, in some areas, a lack of advisory personnel at LEA level were cited as reasons for inadequate support and advice.

The role of the teacher unions

Teacher union officers stressed that the right of pupils to a quality education was always a priority for them when dealing with cases of alleged incompetence, but it was their role to ensure that their member was treated fairly and that procedures were followed properly. In addition to these responsibilities, it was clear that the officers take on a pastoral role, often supporting their member emotionally through what is a very difficult time for them.

There is evidence that, within the common framework of responsibilities of officers, a variety of practice exists. Many of those interviewed reported providing their members with practical advice on their teaching and some, apparently in direct contradiction to their union's policy, were occasionally undertaking classroom observations themselves. Others explicitly indicated that they did not see these types of actions as falling within their role.

The majority of officers indicated that they themselves made judgements about their member's competence and justified this by saying that it helped them to decide on the best advice to offer, while a small number rejected this position from both an ethical and practical point of view. They believed that their role was to defend their member's interest not to judge them, and pointed out that they did not have the information necessary on which to base an assessment. The majority of officers felt that the four week fast track dismissal, being proposed at the time by the UK government, was unreasonable and unworkable for cases of alleged incompetence and they believed that an industrial tribunal would agree with them.

3. Local Education Authority officers

We sought the views of LEA officers on the problem of incompetent teachers as they often have a wider experience of cases of poor performance than head teachers. They are responsible for drawing up procedures to deal with teachers alleged to be incompetent, they advise head teachers in their region and may be involved in monitoring and supporting teachers and setting targets for improvement.

In order to gain their perspective several contrasting types of LEA were contacted and interviews were arranged with a total of 20 of their officers. These consisted of eleven personnel officers and nine advisers from eleven different LEAs. Both groups contained some senior officers, and the advisers included primary and secondary specialists. The LEAs consisted of newly formed authorities as well as long-established rural and urban ones, and included two London boroughs. This section reports the findings from these interviews, and a preliminary analysis and comparison of the LEAs' capability procedures.

Findings

Definitions

When we compared LEA staff's definitions of incompetence with those of head teachers and union officials, many of the same criteria were mentioned: poor discipline, inadequate subject knowledge, failure of pupils to make progress, lack of differentiation and poorly planned or delivered lessons.

Rising numbers and types of cases

LEA officers, like the teacher union personnel, reported a slight increase in the number of cases of alleged incompetence. They did not believe this was due to greater incompetence amongst teachers, although the introduction of and changes to the National Curriculum and an increase in administrative tasks had caused problems for some. Higher expectations of teachers, a higher level of monitoring by head teachers and fewer opportunities to move incompetent teachers into areas where they can do less harm, were also thought to have contributed to the slight rise.

In common with the teacher union representatives, LEA officers reported that most incompetence cases involved teachers in their forties and fifties, but this age group currently constitutes about two thirds of the teaching profession in the UK, so it does not necessarily indicate that older teachers are less competent than younger teachers.

Several officers mentioned finding more problems in primary (5 to 11 year olds) than in secondary (11 to 18 year olds) schools, though they did not conclude from this that primary teachers were more incompetent than their secondary colleagues. They put the difference down to the more restricted opportunities in primary schools for helping teachers having difficulties, or for mitigating the consequences of an individual's poor performance. Primary teachers are more isolated than their secondary colleagues. They rarely have 'non-contact' time, when they can discuss practice or see others teach, and there are fewer opportunities for other teachers to help them.

Interviewees reported a similar description of what they perceived as incompetence to that identified by head teachers and teacher union and association officers - poor class management, problems with planning and preparation, lack of differentiation, inadequate teaching skills such as lack of pace, variety and interest and poor relationships with pupils. Secondly, several LEA officers emphasised that incompetent teachers usually experienced several problems at the same time. They spoke of stress, coming from the job itself, from their own personal lives and from a combination of both. Stress related to teaching was often linked to the introduction of a National Curriculum and the many subsequent changes to it.

Outcomes

In the cases described by LEA officers of teachers who failed to improve, very few were dismissed. The most commonly reported outcome was that they resigned or took early retirement, sometimes on grounds of ill health. Officers were concerned that teachers who resigned or retired were free to teach elsewhere. They were, however, also concerned that

the closure in 1997 of the option of early retirement would mean more cases would continue to the bitter end.

In cases in which teachers' performance improved, the following contributory factors were identified:

1. The teacher acknowledges there is a problem
2. The teacher wants to improve and is receptive to advice
3. The problems are not too severe
4. The problem is tackled early
5. The targets set are clear and achievable
6. Appropriate support and close monitoring are arranged

Changes in the role of the LEA since the introduction, in 1988, of Local Management of Schools (LMS), whereby budgets are devolved to individual schools, have meant that officers are nowadays less able to take the initiative in dealing with cases of poor performance. Some officers expressed concern that local authorities have responsibility for raising standards, but not the power to require schools to take certain actions. The strongest message to emerge from the comments of LEA officers was their belief in the crucial importance of head teachers identifying poor performance early and dealing with it swiftly. They were not in a position to impose a solution on schools, and had to rely on head teachers or governors contacting them for advice and help.

4. Chairs of school governing bodies

Since the 1988 Education Act there has been a significant shift in the UK, in terms of power and control over several issues, away from the local education authority and towards the school governing body, which can vary in size from eight to nineteen members, depending on the size of the school. School governing bodies in England consist roughly of one quarter parents, one quarter teachers, one quarter nominations from the LEA (often local politicians), and one quarter people co-opted from the local community. In practice, it is the governing body that is responsible for appointing and dismissing staff, but in most schools in the maintained sector teachers have their contracts with a local education authority. In theory, the governing body, and certainly the person who chairs it, should become closely involved in any allegations of incompetence in the school. By law, governors must ensure that the school has a set of grievance procedures to deal with issues brought by any member of the school staff and, in the case of local authority schools, the chief education officer must also be consulted.

Following a small number of pilot interviews, 200 questionnaires were sent out to a stratified random sample of primary and secondary schools located in 13 local education authorities (LEAs) in England. These LEAs consisted of new unitary authorities as well as long established rural and urban ones and included London boroughs. The questionnaires were designed to elicit the views and experiences of the chair of governors on the issue of alleged incompetence and 74 completed questionnaires were returned.

Findings

Definitions

In common with heads, union representatives and LEA staff, chairs of governing bodies were also asked the question "How would you define incompetence in relation to the teaching profession?". The most frequently mentioned characteristic given by respondents was a 'lack of discipline'. Personal relationships were also considered to be important by some governors, mainly those between the teacher and the pupil, rather than between teachers and other adults. A number also mentioned inadequate planning, lack of subject knowledge, not differentiating between children of different abilities, and poor examination results. Incompetence was seen by many as recurrent, a pattern that occurred over a period of time, rather than as isolated acts. Such governors sometimes used words like 'persistent' or 'regular'.

Level of involvement of chairs of governing bodies

A third of respondents stated that they had never been informed of a problem identified with a teacher's performance. This could mean that there had never been a problem in their school, or that there had been a problem, but the head and staff had dealt with it alone, or even that a problem had been rectified before the need to inform the governors had arisen. Just over a third had been informed of one or two cases and the remainder had been told of three or more. Between a quarter and a third said they were currently involved in such a case, with one chair being involved in two cases at the time. Of the 74 governors who returned the questionnaire, 50 reported that they had been informed of cases of alleged incompetence at their school.

Outcomes

Outcome data was available for 107 of the cases reported by these 50 governors. In only 22% of these cases had the teacher reached an acceptable level of competence. In 78% of cases, the teacher left his/her post. Once again, the most common exit route, for teachers who were old enough, was early retirement. Outright dismissal was reported in only two cases.

How chairs of governors were informed of cases of incompetence

Although head teachers were the most common source of information about a poorly performing teacher, governors also received comments from parents, teachers, and even pupils themselves. In the majority of cases respondents reported that a problem with a teacher's performance had come to their attention through an *informal* conversation with the head teacher. For the head to give early news formally was much less common (23 respondents mentioned formal information, compared with 41 informal).

Procedural issues

Respondents were asked whether the school had a predetermined procedure to follow when dealing with a teacher who was considered to have a problem with his or her performance. The majority of chairs of governors said that the school used the procedures on offer from their local education authority, although in eleven cases they reported the use of procedures developed in-house. Four chairs said the school had improvised procedures as the case

progressed, not advisable perhaps, given the possibilities of an unfair dismissal charge being laid one day.

The role played by the chair of governors

Most chairs perceived their role as discussing the case with the head teacher and supporting him/her in the course of action adopted:

> "It's important to be (involved) because you have to support the head. It's very stressful for them. They need someone they can trust to talk to, to bounce off ideas. And it gives the teacher involved someone else to rely on and to come to for support."

Many of the governors described how they discussed the case with the head teacher, but the respondent quoted above was one of the very few to mention the member of staff involved. Some chairs believed they had to support the head unquestioningly, while others saw their role as more investigative, wanting to monitor, or check the validity of the case:

> "I try to satisfy myself that the allegations have validity by discussing it with the head and other senior staff. I then monitor the steps being taken to see if the individual can improve his/her performance."

Governors were asked whether they felt that they were kept adequately informed of matters concerning teachers' performance. The majority felt that they were, but a small number wanted more involvement:

> "The whole group of us governors feel the need to be more involved. It's almost as though the head is putting a protective covering around his staff. We never know where our roles and responsibilities as governors begin and end."

> "Yes (I do have sufficient information), but only if I ask questions; through my own observations and if it seems unavoidable that governors have to be involved."

Timing was important and some governors were aggrieved at not being informed of a problem in good time. Some felt they had been compromised or rendered impotent by being kept in the dark too long:

> "(We need) facts giving cause for concern as early as possible. Strategies for dealing on a progressive basis (so that informal techniques can be used if/when appropriate before formal warnings/procedures)."

> "...When we were given the dossier of evidence it was already really thick ... the Titanic was already sinking. If we'd known earlier, perhaps it could have been dealt with differently." (chair of governors and also chair of personnel committee)

While some respondents had indicated that they felt constrained in their role by a lack of insider professional knowledge, in answer to a specific question asking whether they felt they possessed the relevant expertise, just over half of the respondents stated outright that they thought that they did possess sufficient knowledge to carry out their role, mainly because of their own previous experiences and employment history.

Respondents were asked whether they had received training on how to deal with cases of alleged incompetence. Only twelve had. This had typically consisted of either short sessions run by the LEA, or within-school staff training. Unfortunately the emphasis seemed to be more on avoidance and identification, when what some governors really wanted to know was how to deal with the problem once it had occurred.

5. Teachers alleged to be incompetent

The sensitive and confidential nature of allegations about someone's professional competence meant that it was not possible to ask LEAs, teacher unions or head teachers to put us in touch with teachers who had been the subject of or were currently undergoing incompetence/capability procedures. In order to contact such teachers, therefore, a request for volunteers was made in the Times Educational Supplement (England's national educational paper) in November 1997 to which we received 80 responses. We then wrote to these volunteers giving them further information concerning the Teaching Competence Project and enclosed a questionnaire, together with a freepost envelope for its return to us.

In addition, two independent bodies involved with supporting teachers alleged to be incompetent indicated their willingness to inform teachers with whom they were in contact of our research. In total, 70 completed questionnaires were returned to us. Forty-four described past cases and 26 gave details of cases which were on-going.

In line with the age profile of the sample, most of the teachers completing the questionnaire were very experienced practitioners when the case which they described was initiated, with 80% of the respondents having taught for 10 or more years. In 52% of the cases, the teachers concerned had been teaching at the same school for over five years when the allegation was first made. In 10% of cases, they had been at the school for over 15 years.

Completed questionnaires were received from teachers in infant, junior and primary schools, and from the secondary and tertiary sectors, together with six cases concerning teachers in special schools. In the primary sector, teachers from all year groups were represented. In the secondary/tertiary sector, most subjects were represented.

Since the teachers who took part in this research were all volunteers, they may not be representative of all teachers who have been alleged to be incompetent. In only four of the 44 completed cases in this survey had the teacher reached a level of competence acceptable to the school management (i.e. less than 10%). Of the remainder, two were given different duties in the same institution, but the rest (38 teachers) had left their school. By comparison, the head teacher survey, which was based on a national random sample, had provided details of 684 individual cases, of whom 24% reached a level of performance acceptable to the head.

Findings

Definition and identification of incompetence

In this research there have been areas of agreement and of disagreement between different groups and constituencies. The perceptions of those who are accused of incompetence may, in some cases, be diametrically opposed to the perceptions of those who make the allegations.

One person's 'lazy incompetent' is another person's 'unsupported victim', though it must be said that our interviews with head teachers and the questionnaire returns from our national survey of them showed that many heads could empathise with teachers, even though they had to take action against them.

One of the key findings of this research has been that the lack of a universally accepted definition of 'incompetence' may result in different interpretations of the term at different times and in different schools. In 27% of the cases described in this questionnaire survey, teachers indicated that they did not have a job description at the time of the allegation of unsatisfactory performance. There was also scepticism about the basis on which some of the allegations were made, with 25 of the 70 teachers reporting that no *formal* system for monitoring performance existed in their school, and 11 teachers claiming that no monitoring at all took place.

Notification of problem with performance

Teachers were asked by whom and how they were informed of the alleged problems with their performance. In 67% of cases the head teacher had raised the issue with the teacher, in 20% of cases - nearly all in the secondary sector - it had been either the deputy head or head of department and, in 10% of cases, a LEA officer. Ofsted and HMI inspections were reported as other channels through which the allegation of unsatisfactory performance had been made, but these accounted for only a very small number.

Nearly half of the respondents had been informed at a *formal* meeting that their performance was currently unsatisfactory, while a similar number indicated that the matter had been raised with them *informally*. Five teachers reported the shock of receiving the allegation in a letter, without any previous warning, while another five claimed that the issue had been addressed as part of the appraisal process.

The use of the *informal* conversation is one aspect of the process involved with cases of incompetence that needs to be addressed. Individuals have their own definition of 'formality', but, in our national survey of head teachers, 59% of heads stated that the matter was first discussed informally. Head teachers may avoid formality in an attempt to minimise confrontation or distress, but some teachers reported that they had not initially realised how potentially serious their position was and that, by the time they were aware of this, events had overtaken them.

Areas of performance deemed unsatisfactory

Respondents were asked to indicate which areas of their performance had been alleged to be unsatisfactory, distinguishing between those that they perceived to be 'major factors' and those that were 'minor' factor. Table 4 sets out, in rank order, the areas of unsatisfactory performance most frequently mentioned as 'major factors':

Table 4 The areas of unsatisfactory performance most frequently mentioned as major factors

1. Classroom discipline
2. Planning and Preparation
3. Pupils' progress
4. Relationship with colleagues/team members
5. Management role
6. Expectations of pupils
7. Adherence to school policies
8. Monitoring and Assessment
9. Relationship with pupils
10. Management of classroom resources
11. Differentiation
12. Relationship with parents

'Classroom discipline' problems were cited as a 'major factor' in 53% of cases and its ranking in first place in this survey was in line with the findings from our interviews with head teachers, teacher association officers and LEA staff. It differed slightly from the accounts offered in the national head teacher survey which placed 'low expectations' and 'poor pupil progress' first and second, with 'planning and preparation' and 'classroom discipline' in third and fourth place. The cases reported in the teacher and head teacher surveys are not matched, however, so such differences in rank order may be expected. For teachers identified to have a number of weaknesses, however, their own perception of classroom discipline as a *major issue* may be influenced by the amount and visibility of support provided in this particular area, in comparison with the type of support offered for other areas of weakness identified. Alternatively, it may be that teachers are more willing to acknowledge that they have problems with class control because they perceive the blame to lie with others, like the pupils, or other staff for failing to support them.

Teachers' reactions to the allegation of incompetence

Respondents were asked whether they had agreed with the head's assessment. Given that the teachers completing the questionnaire were all volunteers, and many felt strongly that they had been unjustly accused of unsatisfactory performance, it was not surprising to discover that 54 of the 70 teachers had not previously considered that they had a problem with their performance. Of the 16 who did accept that there had been a problem, four believed the management's specific diagnosis of the problem to be incorrect. All except one of these 16 teachers indicated that their problem lay with a lack of classroom discipline.

Of the 54 teachers who indicated that they did *not* agree with the school management's allegation of unsatisfactory performance, a number cited, as evidence, occasions prior to the allegation when their head had praised their performance, or referred to what they saw as a concrete indication of their effective teaching:

> "The head had remarked on two occasions at formal meetings that she considered I was 'an excellent teacher'!"

"In November the head referred to me as 'highly competent' and had full praise for all my work."

"I had the best 'A' level (public examination taken at the age of 18) results in the college for five consecutive years."

We asked the teachers who disagreed with the school management's assessment of their competence to what they attributed the allegation that their performance was unsatisfactory. A wide range of explanations was offered which included: a belief that there was a conspiracy; bullying and victimisation; racial discrimination; incompetence by the head; unjustified complaints from parents; clashes of philosophy; inadequate resources; the need to make staffing cuts as a result of financial pressures.

Teachers' receptiveness to support and advice

Despite the majority of the respondents' vehement rebuttal of the allegation of incompetence, none reported himself/herself as 'always unreceptive' to the support and advice on offer. Although it might have been expected that the four teachers who eventually reached an acceptable level of competence would have been amongst those who were *always receptive* to support and advice, in fact, none of the four ticked this category. Further analysis of the data revealed no relationship between receptiveness to support and advice, and outcome. Nearly a third (31%) of teachers reported themselves as *initially receptive* to the support being offered, but less prepared to accept advice as events progressed. Some of the comments made by respondents challenged the very concept of 'support and advice', as they perceived it:

"What appeared to be support and advice seemed to be used more to make a case against me, rather than in good faith."

"I was always receptive when I trusted the person giving the support and advice and was sure of their good will. The later 'support and advice' was more like harassment and was very difficult to be receptive about."

Another statistic is the reported *lack* of support and advice on offer in a further 31% of the 70 cases, a further striking example of the sometimes sharp differences in perceptions among different groups. This view contrasts starkly with the accounts of processes given by head teachers. It may be that some teachers were resistant to acknowledging that support and advice were being provided, or alternatively it may be that what heads consider to be support and advice was not perceived as such by teachers. Teacher union officers had referred to the blurring of 'support' and 'monitoring' in some procedures and the need to make a clear distinction between the two.

Procedural issues

In the interviews with teacher association officers and LEA personnel and advisory staff, there was evidence that, even where capability procedures existed, head teachers were not always aware of or did not follow them. Forty two per cent of teachers indicated that no predetermined procedure had been followed by the head following the allegation of incompetence and a number of teachers believed that, even where procedures were available, heads did not always use them properly. Indeed, 15% of them said they did not even know

whether any predetermined procedures were being followed. Effective communication between the head and the teacher concerning the procedure being followed is vital if teachers are to understand the seriousness of the allegation and to understand their own rights.

Capability procedures comprise two parts, the 'informal' stage and the 'formal' stage. Respondents were asked whether formal proceedings had been instituted in their case. In the 44 completed cases, where the outcome had been that 38 teachers had left their post, *formal* proceedings were said not to have been instituted in 18 (41%) cases. Many teachers left during the informal stage of the process, before the formal stage is reached. Even where the formal stage had been instituted, it was extremely rare for a case to reach the dismissal stage.

The teachers who expressed positive feelings about the role of the LEA talked in terms of the 'fairness' shown and the support offered. One teacher, who had resigned from his post and had then been helped to find another teaching position by his LEA, described the role of the authority's staff:

> "Personnel officer - absolutely fair in his dealings. Tried to do his best. Advisory teachers - gave support and good ideas."

More often, though, LEA officers were criticised for the way in which they handled teachers. The following comment, typical of others, was made by a teacher undergoing capability procedures at the time. It reinforces the point made by teacher association officers that the process should be handled sensitively, with praise being given, where possible, if improvement is the true goal of the procedure:

> "LEA Adviser [is] more concerned to pick up on negative aspects rather than areas where improvements have been made. She will shift goalposts from visit to visit and positive points from discussion afterwards don't often appear in written feedback – very disheartening."

LEA staff were also often perceived as 'taking the head's side' or for not ensuring that the head had followed procedures correctly.

Perceptions concerning the effectiveness of union representation revealed a polarisation of experiences. Some teachers had found their union representative to be an invaluable support and source of advice, although, often, the praise was for finding the teacher an 'exit with dignity':

> "Union rep invaluable. Negotiated for a good reference in exchange for not carrying out incompetency procedure formally."

A majority of the respondents were unhappy with the representation they had received. Several described their union representative as "useless", while some accused their union of collusion, believing that union officers were more concerned with maintaining good relations with the head and LEA than representing the teacher's interests:

> "Union rep was pretty useless. He seemed to be on the head's side and didn't turn up for a second meeting."

"Support and advice re procedure/alternatives given by union but, in the end, I felt they colluded with the LEA in procuring a redundancy package for me."

As the above comments show, teachers were often unhappy with the role played by their union. They expected the union to contest their case vigorously for them but, in many of the cases, the union was depicted as accepting the diagnosis of the school management of the teacher's incompetence unquestioningly and seeing its role in terms of advising the teacher of the best options for leaving his/her post.

In a number of cases, the teachers had turned to other bodies, like support groups which represent teachers who feel that their union has let them down, although some teachers indicated that the procedures adopted by their school prohibited them from being represented by anyone other than "County Council recognised trade unions".

Outcomes

Many (29) of the 44 teachers whose cases were complete had resigned or retired, while a further seven had been dismissed or made redundant. This finding closely matches the national head teacher survey figure of 70% in the two categories of resignation or retirement, with relatively few actual dismissals. Twenty nine teachers had found another post, 26 of these in teaching. Although some indicated these were not always full-time or to the liking of the teacher concerned, several were happy in their new positions and claimed that their work was now highly esteemed in their new school. The 26 teachers whose cases were still in progress tended to be gloomy about the likely outcome, most fearing they would be dismissed, retire or resign. Only three expected to reach a level of competence acceptable to the head.

We asked the teachers whose cases were complete and who did not reach a level of competence acceptable to the head, why they thought this was. The majority of the responses reiterated the claims made previously: that the initial allegation was incorrect, that staff were conspiring to remove them, that nothing they did would satisfy the head, that they were the victims of bullying and intimidation.

Teachers' reflections on events

With hindsight, many teachers felt they should have been more assertive in the early stages when the allegation of incompetence was first made against them. What became clear from the data was that teachers in this situation often feel traumatised by the allegation and do not know how to react in their best interests. In a number of the cases described in this survey, the relationship between head and teacher had apparently irretrievably broken down with the teachers reporting that they had either taken out grievance procedures against the head or had indicated that they intended to. Some felt they should have acted earlier against the head.

Many of the respondents believed they should have sought support earlier, whether from their union, from the governors, or from colleagues. Several teachers felt they were not given sufficient information about their rights under the capability procedures and called for easier and greater access to legal advice. As one primary teacher put it:

"[You need] knowledge of the legal framework. When you are in a class full-time, you don't have the peace of mind and the information necessary to rebuff the charges."

A number of teachers believed, with hindsight, that once the initial allegation of unsatisfactory performance had been made, it would have been better if they had simply left, rather than try to make the adjustments to their practice required by the head.

Several teachers, when asked if there was anything which would have been helpful which was not available to them at the time, suggested an 'independent assessor':

> "This matter is of an extremely serious nature and I feel that those involved should answer to a higher authority. It was all one-sided. The Authority and headmaster played the role of judge and jury. The whole affair has been like a sentence of death on me. There should be an independent assessment of alleged complaints."

This type of facility was also suggested by a number of the head teachers we have interviewed, who admitted to suffering from doubts about their own judgements of teachers' competence.

Some teachers reported that the confidentiality aspect of the procedures left them feeling isolated and vulnerable, unable to share their misery with others, or gain support and advice. Overwhelmingly, the teachers in this survey felt misjudged and mistreated. Many described medical conditions of themselves, their partner, or close members of their family which they felt had affected their work, but not been taken into consideration.

6. Parents

Evidence from the data gathered from head teachers, teacher unions, LEAs, school governors and teachers suggested that parental complaints about a particular teacher often act as the trigger for a head teacher to raise issues of competence with the teacher concerned. Interviews were therefore undertaken with a sample of 100 parents in various locations, including school playgrounds, but also shopping areas and health centres, so as to find adults likely to have children of school age. The interview schedule was deliberately designed to take only a few minutes to complete and contained a mixture of closed and open questions. The questions focused on which qualities the parents believed made 'a good teacher' and then discussed their construct of 'a bad teacher'. Parents were asked if any aspect of teaching had ever concerned them and whether they had taken any action to resolve the matter.

Findings

'Good' and 'Bad' teachers

Analysis of the data relating to parents' constructs of good teachers revealed the perhaps surprising finding, given the UK government's emphasis on exam league tables and standards in education, that the parents in our survey were apparently more concerned that their children should be happy and safe at school than they were about their progress and levels of attainment.

When asked to describe a 'good teacher' parents referred in particular to personal characteristics such as 'patience' and 'a caring attitude' and said that good teachers have a good relationship with, are interested in and listen to pupils. Professional attributes such as effective teaching methods, good classroom discipline and subject knowledge accounted for

only about a third of the total number of features mentioned. The lack of emphasis on classroom discipline was in contrast to the findings from the surveys of head teachers, LEA staff, teacher association officers, governors, teachers and pupils who all stressed its importance.

When we asked parents the question 'What do you think makes a bad teacher?' some simply said "the opposite of what I've just said a good teacher is", but others supplemented this or responded immediately with features unrelated to their definition of a good teacher. The areas of teaching and teacher behaviours mentioned by parents when describing 'bad' teachers were often the negative versions of the characteristics of good teachers. However, a parent's image of a bad teacher is not always simply the exact polar opposite of her/his picture of a good teacher. For example, parents discussing 'bad' teachers were more likely to refer to 'classroom discipline' than when they were discussing 'good' teachers. In addition, within the 'personal characteristics' category for bad teachers were terms such as 'bossy' and 'untidy in appearance'. In general, parents had less to say about bad teachers (201 items were mentioned in contrast with 254 features of good teachers). Indeed, some parents said they had never encountered a bad teacher.

Issues such as 'planning and preparation' and 'monitoring and assessment', aspects of teaching which receive prominence when professional people talk about teaching, were hardly referred to by parents in either the 'good' or 'bad' context. Equally, however, professional respondents to questions about teaching tend not to use a term like 'shouting', though parents and children have no such inhibitions. Some of the differences between professional and lay people may be genuine differences in perception, others may simply be the result of differences in language and register.

The relatively infrequent mention by parents of such elements as 'children's progress' seems surprising, but when people are given the opportunity to express themselves freely in interview, without prompting, they do not always describe matters that might seem important from the outside. Sometimes this may be because it is not as vital an issue as others may think, but it can also be because something seems self-evident to them, so they do not refer to it specifically.

Parents' accounts of areas of concern and action taken

Parents were asked the question 'Have you ever been unhappy about any aspect of the teaching your child has received?' Fewer than half (46) said they had at some time been concerned about an aspect of their child's education.

Parents' areas of concern

The 46% of parents who had indicated that they had at some time been unhappy about an aspect of the teaching their children had received were asked what the area of concern had been. Table 5 shows the five most frequently mentioned areas.

Table 5 Parents' areas of concern in rank order of most frequently mentioned

1. Discipline/class management issues
2. Level of task not matched to child's ability
3. Bullying
4. Child unhappy/nervous in relationship with teacher
5. Poor teaching quality/teacher didn't explain clearly

As can be seen some parents took a broad whole school view of the term 'teaching' in response to this question, mentioning issues such as bullying, while others focused on a more narrow classroom definition. A few parents talked about factors which were school policy issues, such as the school's general attitude towards parents and occasionally referred to specifics such as the arrangements and costs of school trips. Two mentioned factors partly or wholly outside the control of the school, such as class size.

When parents were asked whether they had ever *complained* about some aspect of the classroom teaching their children had received, however, it was clear that such issues either did not feature in parents' lists of serious concerns, or possibly were perceived as unlikely to be addressed by the school. Parents are often reluctant to complain for a variety of reasons. Some are apprehensive about going into school, others do not want to be seen as carping. The reasons parents actually gave for not complaining included: the child had asked them not to; they felt nothing would be done if they did complain; the child was about to move up to the next class or leave the school.

Subjects of parental complaints

Of the 46 parents who said that they had been unhappy with an aspect of their child/children's education, only 33 had actually raised their concerns with the school. Of the 9 parents who felt that the level of work being set was not matched to their child's ability', 7 actually lodged a complaint. Three of the complaints about inappropriate work were made by parents who felt the reading book sent home with their child was too easy, and all the complaints related to work being at too low a level. In the cases of 'bullying', 6 of the 8 parents made a complaint to the school. The overall numbers in each category were low, but the nature and quality of a child's classroom work or social well-being are more likely to provoke action from aggrieved parents than other aspects of school life.

How parents became aware of the problem and what action they took

We asked the 33 parents who had complained to the school how they had initially become aware of the problem. In just over half of the cases the children themselves had been a direct source of information, while in over a third of cases parents reported that they had recognised there was a problem through observation of their child at home. Seven had noticed that there was 'something wrong' when they were in school, either as visitors or as parent helpers.

Primary school parents were much more likely than secondary school parents to simply raise their concerns by calling informally into the school, accounting for 17 of the 19 cases in this category. The most likely explanation for this is that parents are more likely to be physically present in schools in the primary sector: taking their children to and from school, helping in classrooms, attending class assemblies and other school events. This easy access to school

might account for the fact that only one primary parent waited until the parents' evening to discuss worries. For secondary parents, the more typical route was for contact to be made initially by letter or telephone in order to seek an appointment with the teacher concerned or the line manager/head.

Outcome of complaints

The 33 parents were asked whether they believed that action had been taken to address their concerns. Nineteen reported that action had been taken by the teacher or school. Nine of these parents said that the matter had been resolved to their satisfaction, 7 indicated that while the situation had improved they still had slight concerns and 3 felt no progress at all had been made. Only 4 of the 10 still dissatisfied parents indicated that they intended to press for further action. More surprisingly, perhaps, was the finding that, of the 14 parents who reported that no action at all had been taken to address their complaint, only 5 had contemplated complaining again.

Although it must be remembered that only 33 of the 100 parents had felt they had a concern serious enough to warrant a complaint to their child's school, in only 9 of these cases had the matter been resolved to the parent's satisfaction. It was interesting that none of the cases of classroom discipline problems was resolved completely. This would seem to confirm the views of other parties interviewed in this research - heads, LEA staff and teacher association officers - that it is more difficult for a teacher to overcome difficulties when poor discipline is the problem than in other areas.

7. Pupil Study

In total seven schools were visited with the views of 519 pupils, from age 7 to 16, being collected. The breakdown is shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Pupil study sample details

Year Group	Age of pupils	Number of Pupils
2	7	46
6 and 7	11 and 12	204
9	14	126
11	16	143
Total primary (years 2,6,7) Total secondary (years 9 and 11)		250 269
Overall Total		519

The 46 Year 2 pupils were interviewed in groups of two by a researcher as younger children do not always have the necessary reading and writing competence to cope with a questionnaire. These interviews were relatively short, focused specifically on what the pupils thought was a 'good' and 'bad' teacher, what types of problems, if any, they had in school and what they would do if they were experiencing problems.

The bulk of the sample, consisting of 473 pupils (231 boys, 242 girls) from Years 6, 7, 9 and 11, were given questionnaires by the researchers and asked to complete them during supervised lessons. The pupils were told that their answers were anonymous. They were asked not to name any teachers, but rather to list attributes of 'good' and 'bad' teachers, and were then invited to comment on these two groups and rate their different characteristics.

They were also asked what they would do if they were experiencing problems: to whom they might address complaints, and what they might complain about. The number of questions asked was restricted for two reasons: the first because of the time it takes to complete such a questionnaire and the second because of the sensitive nature of the questions. The questionnaire was constructed so that it would elicit pupils' general views on competency in teaching, without giving the impression that we were focusing on any one teacher.

Findings

Younger Pupils Aged 7 - Year 2

A 'good' teacher

The pupils were asked what they thought made a 'good' teacher. From the comments they made it was apparent that they valued a teacher who let them have some autonomy over doing the curriculum subjects and topics that they liked. They also welcomed the opportunity to do more 'choosing', either at any time of the school day, or as a reward when they had finished their work. A number of the children also mentioned types of extrinsic rewards and positive reinforcement, including the systematic implementation of rewards and privileges, such as extended play, stickers or stars.

Children wanted a caring teacher who was nice and kind. They also wanted someone who was fair and was not unduly 'bossy', did not shout unnecessarily and was good humoured and funny, characteristics which were particularly welcomed. Some children wanted their intellect to be stretched and therefore valued a teacher who gave them harder work, while others liked the idea of having easier work. Despite the use of anonymity, children sometimes described a teacher in such personal terms that it appeared they may have been referring to one single person, rather than a whole genus:

> "He's never bossy, never strict and always funny and he does sport."

A 'bad' teacher

The pupils disapproved of teachers who were unnecessarily strict and punished them too harshly for something that they may or may not have done. Associated with this was the notion of fairness and equity, which were mentioned in their responses about the attributes of a good teacher. They therefore also commented on teachers who shouted at them, did not let them have privileges and were too 'bossy'.

Younger pupils, like the parents reported above, valued caring teachers and they wanted to feel safe and nurtured, so they did not like any suggestion that a teacher might not look after their welfare, be unkind, reprimand them without reason and not explain clearly or assist them when they needed help:

"They always tell you off. Shout at you and screw up your work and throw it in the bin. When my sister fell over she was told to stop crying."

"Give you impossible work, impossible words to read. If you're good, they think you're bad. They wouldn't say you've been good. Be bossy. Not remember your name. Wouldn't take you home if you were ill."

A number of children, as in the above example, mentioned teachers who gave them work that was too hard for them, unable to differentiate between pupils of different abilities. One pupil neatly summarised the views expressed by many about a 'bad' teacher's lack of care and concern, poor social relationships, inability to differentiate, and insensitivity:

"She won't be nice and give us treats. She won't give us good work. (She will) give you hard work. Won't look after us. Won't let us play. Won't give us time to finish our work."

Problems at school

The pupils were asked who they would tell if they were having a problem at school. The majority said that they would go to their class teacher if they needed help, but it also depended upon the nature of the problem and where and when in the school the problem occurred. Fewer than a quarter of younger children mentioned their parents (the figure for older pupils was three quarters), which suggested that their experience to date in the school had meant that many could not, at that stage, envisage a problem which could not be resolved within the school. The head teacher was also likely to be approached in a similar number of cases (no difference with older pupils), which sometimes coincided with them telling their parents. This again was perhaps if the problem was more serious or seen as beyond their class teacher's jurisdiction. One pupil mentioned a specific reason why he might tell the head:

"(I'd tell my) teacher, but if I had a bad teacher, I'd go to the head ... Tell your mum."

Another girl worried in case, if she did tell the teacher, her problem might not be taken seriously enough:

"(I'd tell) my best friend. I might tell the teacher, but they'd just say 'You'll live' and 'Surely it can't be that bad'."

Teachers who were not the pupil's specific class teacher were also mentioned by a few children, as were friends, dinner ladies and the school secretary. These people often appeared to be selected if the problem took place outside classroom time, such as at lunchtime or playtime:

"(I'd choose the) other teacher because she's a good shouter."

Pupils were asked what sorts of problems they might experience inside school. The answers to this question showed that nearly half of the pupils were aware of problems that related to name calling, pushing or being left out of games and activities, often in the playground. Fewer than a fifth of the 7 year old pupils mentioned problems such as falling over or hurting

themselves. Other problems mentioned were those that would take place in the classroom and involved being unable to do their work properly because of interference from others or occasions where they might have broken one of the classroom rules:

> "Not being able to finish my work, because I didn't know what to do, or how to do it."

> "You might answer back and get into trouble. Being rude ... Calling people names. I talk too much and that's a problem ... Bullying in the playground."

Older Pupils Aged 11 To 16 - Years 6, 7, 9 And 11

Important attributes of a teacher

The older pupils' views on what is important in a good teacher were sought through a series of statements. Table 7 summarises and shows the rank order of those considered 'very important' by pupils in their responses on a four point scale: 'very important', 'quite important', 'not important', and 'not at all important'.

Table 7 Important attributes of a teacher (percentage of older pupils (n=473) saying, in each case, 'very important' on a four point scale)

Attributes	Percentage of pupils mentioning as 'very important'
Explains clearly	91
Good exam preparation	91
Treats all pupils fairly	88
Can keep control	83
Matches task to ability	77
Subject knowledge	74
Interesting lessons	61
Punctual for lessons	59
Good relation with pupils	57
Marks work regularly	50
Makes useful comments on work	44
Tells off for bad behaviour	39
Praises good work	36
Praises good behaviour	34
Sets homework	29
Doesn't keep you waiting	27
Dresses smartly	17
Tells off for bad work	14
Displays your work	11

As Table 7 shows, pupils hold highest in their esteem those aspects of teaching that enable them to learn, such as explaining, exam preparation, the creation of an orderly environment and matching work to individuals. Fairness figures highly, as do a cluster of elements that make learning more pleasurable, such as interest and positive relationships. Dress, classroom displays and punctuality, though often esteemed by teachers and heads, are seen as superficial,

with only a quarter or fewer of pupils mentioning them as being very important. Reprimands produce a varying response, with a scolding for poor behaviour much more acceptable (39%) than one for inadequate work (14%).

Complaints

As head teachers had indicated that triggers for taken action to deal with an incompetent teacher often included pupil comments and complaints, the pupils were asked what types of problems they would be likely to complain about and to whom they would complain.

Informal channels of complaint are more common than formal ones, with over three quarters of pupils saying they would tell their parents and nearly half telling a friend. Pupils may turn to parents first for a variety of reasons, including the need for advice, immediate response, the perceived greater likelihood of parents gaining a hearing (though pupils are often reluctant to let their parents contact the school), or simply to keep the emotional temperature low. Friends are not necessarily any more empowered than pupils themselves, but they are in a position to empathise and may even attend the same school or lessons.

Within the school structure high status people, like head teachers, come lower than more immediate teachers. The head of year is in a middle management position and is the most favoured of the in-school professionals, partly because their role is often one of trouble-shooter, and partly because they combine immediacy and status, but not at the highest level. Their own class teacher, another teacher, and the head teacher were chosen by similar numbers of pupils with a fifth to a quarter opting for each one. The least likely person was the deputy head, selected in less than 10% of cases. The comments below suggest that some respondents see teachers as combining in formidable and impenetrable professional solidarity:

> "I wouldn't know who to go to really. Teachers are all friends (with each other) and it could get me into trouble with the teacher concerned."

> "It's hard to complain about a teacher because the one you complain to is not there, so it's the teacher's word versus yours and the teacher wins 99% of the time, but they know they're in the wrong."

Actual reasons for complaint were varied. Most were about fundamental professional skills, such as the ability to control pupils' behaviour, arouse interest, or teach a syllabus successfully, and personal relationships and qualities. Over half the pupils said they would complain if they thought teachers behaved in an unfair manner, did not explain clearly, set too much homework, or if the work was too difficult. Inadequate exam preparation, boring lessons and shouting also aroused ire, as did absence from school, lack of punctuality and infrequent marking of pupils' work. Pupils were least likely to complain if they thought the teacher was giving them too little homework.

A 'good' teacher

Each pupil was asked to try to write down at least three actions illustrating what they thought a good teacher actually did. Since this gave respondents a free choice the responses were initially analysed qualitatively and then quantified. Over 40 characteristics were identified, although some were mentioned by only a few pupils. Some major factors could be detected,

showing that the most highly valued teachers were likely to demonstrate pupil-centred, supportive behaviour: helping those in difficulty, explaining concepts clearly, having a sense of humour, but being in charge nonetheless. Seven characteristics were mentioned by one hundred pupils or more, i.e. by a quarter or more of the sample. Table 8 lists these in order of frequency.

Table 8 Attributes of a good teacher

1. Helps when pupils are stuck
2. Explains clearly
3. Can control the class
4. Has a sense of humour
5. Is friendly/has a good relationship with the pupils
6. Interesting and enjoyable lessons
7. Listens to children

One 14 year old girl was very clear about the type of teacher she wanted:

> "Makes the lessons fun, but educational at the same time. Can control the class well but not harshly. Doesn't punish all the class for one person's mistake. Explains the lesson clearly and is willing to listen to questions."

The same combination of characteristics occurred numerous times. Pupils often liked similar clusters of characteristics, expressed not in the language of professional discourse (e.g. 'differentiation'), but in everyday natural language:

> "A good teacher treats pupils equally. Explains work clearly. Listens to your opinion. Gives work to your ability."

One 14 year old boy summarised neatly the delicate balance between friendliness and control:

> "Someone who you can have a joke with. Someone who can control the class. Someone who is good tempered. Someone who doesn't tell you off all the time."

Other respondents echoed the same theme of balance between the firm and the friendly, seeing it as an essentially human blend of mastery of the relevant knowledge combined with an intimate understanding of the needs of those in the process of acquiring it:

> "Needs to have discipline. Needs to know what he/she is doing. Should be responsible/honest/organised. Should get on well with the students."

> "They're kind. They are helpful. They know what they're talking about and aren't just reading what they have written earlier."

A 'bad' teacher

To some extent the image of a 'bad' teacher, as one would expect, is the obverse of what is seen as 'good'; not the precise mirror image, but reflecting near enough the opposite of what was said above. The most negative attributes to emerge were a teacher who was perceived as

too strict and who shouted too frequently. The next two least favoured characteristics, mentioned by over hundred pupils, were teachers who did not explain clearly and did not help pupils when they were 'stuck'.

It was the disrespect of someone who appeared not to listen to them that irked a number of pupils. Other obverse characteristics of what was seen in 'good' teachers included: teachers who could not control the class, bad tempered teachers, those who were unfair to pupils, those who did not make their lessons enjoyable and teachers who had poor relationships with pupils. Each of these features was mentioned by at least 50 pupils.

> "No sense of humour - is always 100% work. Has favourites in the class - ignores others. Is never willing to help. Sets work which is too hard and never explains."

> "Tells you off all the time for nothing. Too strict with you. Doing it for the money and doesn't care about the children."

Differences between boys and girls and pupils of different ages

There was a near universal quality among different age groups and between boys and girls on several characteristics, but there were other aspects where significant differences were noted. Many of the characteristics mentioned were similar, though taking slightly different forms. Older and younger children wanted fair-minded teachers who could explain things to them, were 'in charge', though not unduly strict, and who had a good sense of humour. As pupils grew older they became more aware of a teacher who was able to control the class and who would prepare them well for examinations.

At all ages pupils seemed to value differentiation, albeit articulating it differently. Many said they valued caring teachers who allowed them a degree of autonomy, although there was a shift in how they were meant to achieve this as the pupils got older. Younger pupils liked the privilege of 'choosing', as well as winning extrinsic rewards such as stars and stickers. Older pupils, particularly the 16 year olds in Year 11, focused more on the adult notion of mutual respect and a desire to be seen as young grown ups rather than as children:

> "Shows discipline from day one. Treats students with respect [and gets the] same in return. Understands society and talks openly about issues. Has a personality of being confident, but also knows when to cross the line with work."

> "Helps to give a better understanding. Can control the class. Likes to have a laugh. Treats us like adults."

Chi-square tests were performed on all measures taken of the 473 pupils aged 11 to 16, with boys and girls compared, as well as younger pupils at the end of the primary phase (Years 6 and 7) with older secondary pupils (Years 9 and 11). The following significant differences emerged, with one, two and three asterisks indicating the .05, .01 and .001 levels of significance respectively:

Boys and girls

Girls were more likely than boys to value:

Good class control***
Teachers who listened***
Teachers who didn't shout**
Interesting lessons**
Clear explanations*
Girls were also more likely than boys to complain to a friend*

Boys were more likely than girls to value:

Teachers who were caring and kind**

Younger (Years 6 and 7) and older (Years 9 and 11) pupils

Younger pupils were more likely than older pupils to value:

Good display of their work***
Teachers who were caring and kind***
Interesting lessons***
Teachers who were good tempered**
Teachers who didn't shout*
Teachers who were fair*

Older pupils were more likely than younger pupils to value:

Teachers who dressed well***
Good class control***
Good subject knowledge***
Friendly teachers***
Older pupils were also more likely than younger pupils to complain to a friend***

ENDNOTE

Studying allegations of incompetence is a most tortuous and frustrating area of research. It is one of the best (or worst, depending on how one sees it) examples of multiple perceptions of reality. One person's feckless incompetent is another person's misunderstood victim. There are many consistencies in what different groups report, however, but also inconsistencies. Many elements recur, like low expectations and poor classroom control. At the same time the context seems vital. There were examples of teachers who did badly in one school but well in another, or who taught one subject well but another subject badly. All parties were emotionally seared by the experiences, and in some individual cases the health of the teacher, the head teacher or others appeared to suffer. Although the UK government is currently addressing the issue of alleged incompetence, when we looked at practice in other European countries there were often no agreed procedures for dealing with allegations. For too long the whole issue has been given a low priority and has been clouded by lack of research evidence

of a fundamental kind. We hope the present study has at least cast some light on what is often regarded as a taboo subject for systematic enquiry.

Full findings of the Teaching Competence Project will be reported in October 1999 in:

***FAILING TEACHERS?* by E C Wragg, G S Haynes, C M Wragg and R P Chamberlin, Routledge, London.**

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